

Childhood Trauma and Patterns of Later Romantic Belief

Emma Meneses, Allyson Stoner, Kasey Charron; Supervised by Hugh Stephenson, Ph.D.



Introduction

Childhood abuse and neglect have an impact on interpersonal relationships. One area of impact includes patterns of romantic beliefs. Romanticism, a pattern of thinking that effects adult relationships, is likely influenced by early developmental experiences. Romantic beliefs have been operationalized as “One and Only,” “Idealization,” “Love Finds a Way,” and “Love at First Sight”. It is likely that romantic beliefs are influenced by experiences of abuse and neglect, but currently little research addresses this.

Research has established that childhood sexual abuse is correlated with higher levels of trauma-related symptoms and lower levels of attachment security in close-adult, parent-child, and peer relations (Aspelmeier, J. E., Elliott, A. N., & Smith, C. H., 2007). Bijari, Hosseini, & Nasiri [2016] found that emotional trauma in childhood is negatively correlated with secure attachment, and physical trauma predicted anxious attachment. This contradicts Finzi, Cohen, Sapir, & Weizman [2000], who found positive correlations between physical abuse and avoidant attachment, as well as between neglect and anxious attachment.

High levels of romanticism can be maladaptive; blind optimism and over-idealization may lead to unreasonable expectations and disappointment in relationships. Stackert, R., & Bursik, K. [2003], for instance, demonstrated that insecure attachment styles are associated with irrational romantic beliefs. Although counterintuitive, higher romanticism may be associated with childhood abuse and neglect. The current study explores the relationship between the types of trauma and adult romantic beliefs.

Hypotheses

- Childhood abuse and neglect will be positively associated with greater adult romantic beliefs.
- Physical abuse and sexual abuse will be more strongly associated with romantic beliefs than other forms of childhood trauma.

Methods

- 102 students at an undergraduate institution completed this study in a supervised lab setting using the online survey tool Qualtrics. 78 identified as female and 24 identified as male.
- Participants completed the Romantic Beliefs Scale which includes the subscales “Idealization,” “One and Only,” “Love Finds a Way,” and “Love at First Sight.” They also completed the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire which includes subscales of Physical Abuse, Emotional Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Emotional Neglect, and Physical Neglect.
- This study was approved by the college’s Institutional Review Board.

Results

Relationship Between Romantic Beliefs and CTQ

	Total CTQ	Physical Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Emotional Abuse	Emotional Neglect	Physical Neglect
Total RBS	.23*	.24*	.29**	.20*	-.03	.26**
Love Finds a Way	.07	.06	.08	.16	-.08	.07
One and Only	.30**	.34**	.29**	.32**	.08	.20*
Idealization	.18	.18	.30**	.08	-.06	.28**
Love at First Sight	.17	.19	.27**	.05	-.05	.31**

*significant at $p < .05$

**significant at $p < .01$

- Romantic beliefs were significantly positively correlated with total CTQ, ($r(101) = .23, p = .023$).
- Physical abuse was significantly correlated with “One and Only” ($r(101) = .34, p < .001$).
- Sexual abuse was most strongly correlated with RBS, ($r(101) = .28, p = .004$), “Idealization,” ($r(101) = .30, p = .003$), “One and Only,” ($r(101) = .30, p = .003$), and “Love at First Sight,” ($r(101) = .27, p = .006$).
- Physical neglect was also significantly correlated with RBS, ($r(101) = .26, p = .009$), “Idealization,” ($r(101) = .28, p = .004$), “One and Only,” ($r(101) = .20, p = .041$), and “Love at First Sight,” ($r(101) = .31, p = .002$).
- Emotional abuse was not as strongly associated with RBS, ($r(101) = .20, p = .042$), and “One and Only,” ($r(101) = .32, p = .041$).

Discussion

The present study supported our first hypothesis that childhood trauma would be associated with greater romantic beliefs. This relationship was largely reflected in the beliefs that “There will only be one true love for me” or “Once I experience ‘true love’, I could never experience it again, to the same degree, with another person,” which was associated with emotional, sexual, and physical abuse as well as physical neglect. This idealistic, and somewhat unrealistic, view of relationships may serve as a self-protective strategy by keeping someone either in a dependent relationship or out of all relationships through anxious or avoidant attachment styles, respectively.

The second hypothesis was partially supported, in that physical abuse was associated with “One and Only” and sexual abuse had strong associations with all romantic beliefs, except for “Love Finds a Way.” This is not surprising, as sexual abuse involves violation of both emotional and physical boundaries. However, we did not predict the strong association between physical neglect and romantic beliefs. Emotional neglect was the only form of abuse that was not related to greater romantic beliefs. Additionally, belief in “Love at Finds a Way” was not associated with any form of childhood abuse.

These data suggest that childhood trauma may be associated with maladaptive romantic beliefs including the search for the “perfect partner” leading to rejecting viable potential partners. Conversely, there may be an increased chance of staying in an abusive partnership as the abusive partner is perceived as “the one.” Those with a history of abuse might benefit from therapy that addresses these relationship issues.

These findings should be generalized with caution, due to sample size and the population studied. Relationships and romantic belief patterns may be different in older participants and longer-term relationships.

References

See handout for references

Romantic Belief Subscales

- One and Only
 - There is only one person we can truly love
 - “Once I experience ‘true love’, I could never experience it again, to the same degree, with another person.”
- Love at First Sight
 - True love can strike without prior interaction
 - “When I find my ‘true love’ I will probably know soon after we meet.”
- Love Finds a Way
 - True love can overcome any obstacle
 - “If I love someone, I will find a way for us to be together regardless of the opposition to the relationship, physical distance between us or any other barrier.”
- Idealization
 - Our true love will be perfect
 - “I’m sure that every new thing I learn about the person I choose for a long-term commitment will please me”

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire

Participants were asked if they ever experienced the following and responded with a Likert scale of “Never True” to “Very Often True”

- Physical Abuse
 - “Got hit so hard that I had to see a doctor or go to the hospital”
 - “I was punished with a belt/board/cord/other hard object”
- Emotional Neglect – Reverse Scored
 - “I felt loved”
 - “Someone in my family helped me feel important or special”
- Emotional Abuse
 - “People in my family called me ‘stupid,’ ‘lazy,’ or ‘ugly’
 - “I thought my parents wish I had never been born”
- Physical Neglect
 - “I didn’t have enough to eat”
 - “My parents were too drunk or high to take care of the family”
- Sexual Abuse
 - “Someone tried to touch me in a sexual way/made me touch them”
 - Someone tried to make me do/watch sexual things”

References

- Af Bijari, S H Hosseini, & M Nasiri. (2016). The Relationship between Childhood Trauma, Attachment Style and Self-Knowledge in People with Borderline Personality Disorder. *Majallah-i Dānishgāh-i Ulūm-i Pizishkī-i Bābul*, 18(7), 14–18.
- Aspelmeier, J. E., Elliott, A. N., & Smith, C. H. (2007). Childhood sexual abuse, attachment, and trauma symptoms in college females: The moderating role of attachment. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 31(5), 549-566. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2006.12.002
- Finzi, R., Cohen, O., Sapir, Y., & Weizman, A. (2000). Attachment Styles in Maltreated Children: A Comparative Study. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 31(2), 113–128. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1001944509409>
- Stackert, R., & Bursik, K. (2003). Why am I unsatisfied? Adult attachment style, gendered irrational relationship beliefs, and young adult romantic relationship satisfaction. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 34(8), 1419–1429 doi:10.1016/S0191-8869(02)00124-1